

KHALJI SULTANS AND THE CALIPH

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In one of the earlier issues of this journal, I had presented a numismatic appraisal of the relationship between the early Turkish Sultans of Delhi and the Caliph.² After a long time I have once again picked up the strand and I continue with the discussion.

In AH 689/ AD 1290, a group of nobles led by **Jalal Ud-Din Firoz Shah (Ii) Khalji** (AH 689-95/ AD 1290-6), overthrew the incompetent Sultan Kayumars and laid the foundation of what is known as Khalji dynasty (AH 689-720/ AD 1290-1320).

Jalal ud-Din Firoz's coins are no different from those of his predecessors. On the gold and silver coins the name of the dead Caliph Al Must'asim is inscribed, while that of the Sultan is without any Caliphal titles (**Illus. 1**).



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² 'Early Sultans of Delhi and the Caliph', *ND*, 19, 1995, pp. 101-15.

On billon and copper coins of Jalal ud-Din Firoz both the name of the Caliph and also his own Caliphal titles are absent (**Illus. 2**).

Jalal ud-Din Firoz Shah Khalji was assassinated at Kara near Allahabad in AH 695/ AD 1296 by his nephew and son-in-law 'Ala ud-Din. The arrival of this news at the capital Delhi led a group of nobles to raise **Rukn ud-Din Ibrahim Shah I (AH 695/ AD 1296)**, a minor son of the dead Sultan, to the throne. He had a very brief reign of only five months and is otherwise an obscure figure in the history of Delhi Sultanate.

Only one gold coin and two silver coins of this Sultan are known. While the name of Caliph does not appear in the coin legend, they bear the name of his father Jalal ud-Din Firoz Shah along with the Caliphal title – *Nasir-i Amir ul-Mominin* (Helper of the Commander of the Faithful) that used by him on his own coins (**Illus. 3**).



3

The billon and copper coins, as usual lay plain to Caliphal recognition.

The importance of the coinage of this Sultan lies in the fact that he broke the tradition of inscribing the name of the dead Caliph on coins, a tradition that had been followed by his predecessors since the time of Sultan Nasir ud-Din Mahmud. It is, however, questionable whether the minor Sultan was himself capable of taking such a policy decision at the very outset of his reign? After the emergence of the Khaljis on the political horizon of Delhi

Sultanate, the religious class (*Ulemas*) and other high officials of the state had started thinking about the futility of continuing the tradition of including the name of the dead Caliph in the *Sikkah* and *Khutbah*. They had probably pressed their point of view earlier but the pious and aged monarch Jalal ud-Din Firoz, in his own sentimental way, had refused to remove the martyred Caliph's name. It was, however, removed at the death of the old Sultan, and the boy king Rukn ud-Din was styled *Nasir-i Amir ul-Mominin* without being specific as to who this *Amir ul-Mominin* was. Thus, the coinage of Rukn ud-Din presents a tell-tale story of the thinking of contemporary society regarding the myth of the Caliph. Henceforth the name of the Caliph does not make its appearance on the coins of Sultan of Delhi until the reign of Muhammad bin Tughlaq.

'Ala ud-Din Muhammad Shah (II) Khalji (AH 695-715/ AD 1296-1316) became the Sultan of Delhi by deposing Ibrahim Shah, the puppet Sultan of Delhi. He consolidated his sovereign position by luring the nobles with lavish gifts. While boasting himself as a *Sikandar us-Sani* (the Second Alexander), 'Ala ud-Din Khalji, at the same time revived the old Caliphal titles *Yamin ul-Khilafah* (Right Hand of the Caliph) and also called himself *Nasir-i Amir ul-Mominin* on his gold and silver coins and inscriptions (**Illus. 4**).



4

The billon and copper coins of 'Ala ud-Din too, are without the name of the Caliph or the Caliphal titles for the Sultan.

It is interesting to note that though the coins of 'Ala ud-Din proclaimed him as Right Hand and the Helper of the Caliph, his court poet Amir Khusru unhesitatingly mentions him as *Khalifah uz-Zaman* (Caliph of the Age).

Shihab ud-Din 'Umar (AH 715/ AD 1316), a minor prince of five or six years, was raised to the throne of Delhi, after the death of his father 'Ala ud-Din Khalji. On his gold and silver coins he has used the titles adopted by his father (**Illus. 5**).



5

The billon coins of this Sultan too, bear neither the name of the Sultan nor the Caliphal titles.

Qutb ud-Din Mubarak Shah (AH 716-20/ AD 1316-20) deposed Shihab ud-Din 'Umar and succeeded as Sultan of Delhi. His initial coinage reveals the conventionalized usage of the Caliphal legend. The Caliphal titles found on the coins of the opening years of his reign are same as used by his two predecessors, though for himself he uses a more lofty title *Iskandar uz-Zaman* (Alexander of the Age). These coins are dated in AH 716-7/ AD 1316-7. (**Illus. 6**)



6

Later on we see the revolutionary change in the coin legends of this Sultan. On his gold and silver coins dated from AH 717/ AD 1317 onwards he calls him *Al Imam ul-A'zam* (The exalted Imam), *Khalifah-i Rab ul-'Alimin* (The Vicegerent of the Lord of the World i.e. Allah); *Khalifatu-l-lah* (The Vicegerent of Allah), *Amir ul-Mominin* (Commander of the Faithful). In addition, he appropriated to himself the name of a later 'Abbasid Caliph in Cairo, *Al Wathiq Billah* (literally 'Confiding in Allah'). Delhi – the capital of his empire – was adorned with the title of *Hazrat* (Honourable) on the coins of his opening years. Subsequently it was given the epithet *Dar ul-Mulk* (Abode of the Empire). With the adoption of Caliphship by the Sultan, the mint-epithet of Delhi was aptly changed to *Hazrat Dar ul-Khilafah* (the Honourable Abode of the Caliph) (**Illus. 7-8**).



7



8



The billon coins of Qutb ud-din were also struck with his Caliphal titles viz. *Al Imam al-Azam*, *Khalifatu-l-lah*, *Al Wathiq Billah*, *Amir ul-Mominin* (**Illus. 9**) and *Khalifah-i Rabb ul-'Alamin* (**Illus. 8**). On the copper issues, nothing more than *Al Imam ul-Azam* is found in the coin legend (**Illus. 10**).



9



10

The real motive behind Qutb ud-din's pretensions to the Caliphate is not known. Different opinions have been framed by the scholars. To Nelson Wright it reflected 'the arrogant vanity of the Sultan.'³ U.N. Day suggested that the Turks (i.e. the Seljuq Turks), who had witnessed bad days in the last quarter of thirteenth century at the hands of Byzantine and Mongol powers found it prudent to accept Qutb ud-Din Mubarak Shah Khalji as Caliph – 'an institution which has been destroyed by Ilkhanids' – perhaps to counter the 'possibility of Shi'ite combination of Mongols, Arabs and Sumras (in Sindh)'.⁴ That Qutb ud-Din's assumption of Caliphal titles for himself was a sort of proclamation of the liberation of Delhi Sultanate from the 'Abbasid Caliphate, is another theory that has been put forward by the scholars.

Perhaps the real reason behind Qutb ud-Din's act was that he had inherited a strong empire, built strong and enriched by the exploits of his uncle 'Ala ud-Din Muhammad Khalji. Qutb ud-Din might not have cared to pay homage to a dead Caliph or he may even have thought that if there could be Caliphs in Madina, Damascus, Baghdad, Cordoba and later on in Cairo, why not in India which was, if Amir Khusro at all reflects Qutb ud-Din's views, superior to all other countries. Khusro hailed Qutb ud-Din as *Khalifah-i Mubarak* (the Auspicious Caliph) and called Delhi *Hazrat Dar ul-Khilafah* (the Honourable Abode of the Caliph). Scholars have argued that 'his act of proclaiming himself as Caliph and the leader of Sunni community' should have been censured by the *Ulemas* of the age or at least after his death. The answer to this may be found in the fact that the Caliphate as an institution was probably more revered in the Islamic world, especially amongst the Sunnis, than the person of the Caliph. After the destruction of the institution of the Caliphate and the murder of the ruling Caliph at the hands of Mongols, the Sunnis were left without any 'religious or temporal

³ Nelson Wright, *Coinage and Metrology of the Sultans of Delhi*, Delhi, 1936, p. 107.

⁴ U.N. Day, *Some Aspects of Medieval Indian History*, New Delhi, 1971, p. 13.

head'. Meanwhile the activities of the Shi'as were gaining popularity in India. At this juncture Qutb ud-Din declared himself the 'Commander of Faithful', thus, filling in the vacuum which was considered 'politically dangerous'. The absence of a Caliph was also considered canonically undesirable by the orthodox *Ulema*. His act gave them a shield to fight the Shi'ite challenge, and thus he was hailed as 'Caliph of Allah', by contemporaries and successors.

However, this remains an isolated case of assumption of Caliphship by any Sultan of Delhi.

Shams ud-Din Mahmud (AH 718/ AD 1318) was raised to the throne of Delhi as a part of conspiracy during the absence of Qutb ud-Din Mubarak Shah to the Deccan. Only one gold coin of this Sultan is known⁵. Here this pretender calls him *Sikandar uz-Zaman*, 'Azd ul-Khilafah (Helper of the Caliphate), and *Nasir-i Amir ul-Mominin* (Illus. 11).



Goron and Goenka have suggested that the word 'Azd عضد (literally 'upper arm, support') might have been inserted in the coin legend by Asad ud-Din, the leader of the conspiracy against

⁵ This coin bears the mint name as *Qila' Deogir*. According to Goron and Goenka it bears out the fact that the conspiracy to depose and kill Mubarak Shah was not confined to Delhi but was more wide-spread than hitherto believed. (Stan Goron and J.P. Goenka, *Coins of the Indian Sultanates*, New Delhi, 2001, p. 44).

Mubarak Shah, who might have intended 'himself as the next sultan.'⁶

The billon coins of this Sultan bear neither the Caliph's name nor any Caliphal titles for the Sultan (**Illus. 12**).

Nasir ud-Din Khusro (AH 720/ AD 1320) was the last scion of Khalji dynasty. On his gold and silver coins he bears very simple title for himself viz. *Al Wathiq ba Nasr al-Rahman Wali-i Amir ul-Mominin* (Confiding in the Assistance of the Merciful; Trustee of the Commander of Faithful) (**Illus. 13**).



The billon coins of this Sultan also bear the title *Wali-i Amir ul-Mominin* (**Illus. 14**). Whether he referred to last Sultan Qutb ud-Din or to some imaginary 'Commander of Faithful' is, however, not clear.

His copper coins are, however, without any Caliphal titles.

⁶ *Ibid.* The authors probably overlooked the orthography of the words **عزاد** ('Azd) and **اسد** (Asad meaning lion), which was part of the name of the noble referred to by them. Malik Asad ud-Din (literally 'Lion of the Faith') was the son of Malik Yagharsh Khan, an uncle of 'Ala ud-Din Khalji. He was captured by Mubarak Shah and was beheaded along with his brothers. Without the dot over the middle letter *zu'ad* (**ض**) the word **عزاد** ('Azd) would be read as **عصد** ('Asad or 'Asd) and such a word has no meaning.

The thirty-year rule of the Khalji dynasty, though brief, saw two significant developments. One that during the reign of its second Sultan, the name of Caliph Al Must'asim, who had died as early as in 1258 and whose name had continued to appear on the coins of the successive Sultans of Delhi, was removed from the coin-legend once and for all. Second, that the fifth Sultan of this dynasty appropriated the title of the Caliph to himself and declared him as the 'Caliph of the Age'. Both these events demonstrate as to how inconsequential had the bond between the Sultans of Delhi and the 'Abbasid Caliph had become by the turn of the thirteenth century.